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Solid gold teeth, soft consonants, heat, and thirst are what I remember from that day. The solid gold teeth were masterpieces of Soviet dentistry, filling the mouths of those who smiled now as they seemed to have won a famous victory over their masters in Moscow. The soft consonants were part of the Ukrainian accents I heard around me in the square in front of the Ukrainian parliament. Where most Russian accents pronounce 'G' as a hard sound, Ukrainian softens it. The crowd, intoxicated with the excitement of sudden change, chanted slogans of independence, and hissed insults about 'Horbachev', as they called the last leader of the Soviet Union.

They could say what they liked. The week before, an attempted coup by hardliners in Moscow had failed. Mikhail Gorbachev had been released from detention at his holiday house in the Crimea. Yet when he returned to Moscow just after midnight on 22nd August 1991, the Soviet Union he hoped to lead once more was cracked beyond repair, and already in the process of crumbling. As a producer for the television news agency Visnews (soon to become Reuters Television), I was sent to Kiev. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was trying to decide whether it would break away from the Union of which it had been a part for most of the 20th century – not to mention the Russian Empire before that. The session of the rada – the Ukrainian parliament – went on, while the crowd chanted and shouted in the hope of swaying the lawmakers' decision. It was baking hot. There was little chance of anything to eat or drink. The food supplies of the late Soviet period were so unpredictable there was not much chance of grabbing a snack on the street. Suddenly, the crowd went wild with joy. The Soviet Ukrainian flag was lowered – hammer, sickle, and all – from the pole on top of the parliament. The blue and yellow Ukrainian flag rose in its place.

Formal independence followed, or so it seemed. As the fighting in Ukraine this year has shown, it was not that simple. The incident stays in my mind because the material I sent that day – a few paragraphs of script, and some shaky video material – contributed, in however small a way, to that famous first draft of history. Perhaps I did not fully realize it then – too pressed, as I was, by deadlines, and worrying whether I would beat the opposition – but this was part of one of the events which would define the time in which I lived, and worked as a journalist. For someone born, as I was, in Western Europe in the 1960s, the world as I knew it as a child was to change. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major milestone on that road of transformation.

A decade after that hot late summer day in Kiev, I stood within sight – just – of smoking ruins in lower Manhattan. It was Friday 14th September 2001, and the wreckage of the World Trade Center's twin towers smouldered on, three days after the aircraft had brought them down. Even the next evening, as I crossed back after nightfall from a meeting in Brooklyn, smoke rose still: two white columns then, lit by the rescue workers' lights, where once the towers themselves had stood. There was no question then that this was an event which would have far reaching consequences, including, inevitably, much more bloodshed. At the time, those consequences were unclear. No one could make sense yet of what had happened, never mind what was to come. On the Sunday, five days after the attacks, I met relatives searching still for those who must by then have been dead. They struggled to understand anything that had happened that week, not least their sudden, violent, bereavement.

Having packed in haste once transatlantic airspace was opened (it had been closed since the attacks, and I was based in Brussels), I found myself short of boots. Taking a break one morning, I bought a new pair. I was wearing them on another assignment in December two years later. The United States 'war on terror' was underway in both Afghanistan, and Iraq. One Sunday morning in Baghdad, rumours began. They started like a snowflake or two falling from a grey sky, and soon turned into a blizzard. That afternoon, the leader of the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer confirmed them with his perfectly polished headline, 'We got him!' Saddam Hussein, a fugitive since the invasion some nine months earlier, had been captured. The story was the lead everywhere in the western world, and many places beyond. It was not until later that reporters, and the occupying powers for that matter, realized that, in terms of Iraq's future, it would not mean the end of armed resistance to the invasion. On the contrary, the insurgency, which would lead the invasion to be judged in most quarters a disaster, was still months away.

How hard is it for journalists to work out, in that moment, that they are seeing things which will change the world? It is a question I have been considering at length lately as I work on a book about the reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My interest comes from my own time reporting from Gaza for the BBC from 2002 to 2004. Seeking a longer term perspective, I began my research with the reporting of the 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem – an incident chosen because the hotel was then the Headquarters for the British political and military authorities administering the British Mandate to run Palestine. As such, it was also a magnet for journalists. So when, one lunchtime, bombers from Irgun, a Jewish Armed group seeking to drive the British from Palestine, blew up a wing of the hotel, several reporters narrowly escaped being killed. One of them, the Daily Express' Peter Duffield, even allowed himself a little newsroom joke – perhaps in poor taste. As the introduction to his piece explained, he had been commissioned to write a feature, 'Dateline King David'. 'Hours later he cabled, "A lot of the hotel I was writing about is not standing now – but maybe the feature will stand up."' Duffield also, considering the map of Palestine on the wall of an office where he waits to interview an official, suggests that it is about 'the size of Wales'. I wondered if my research had turned up one of the earliest uses of this standard journalistic comparison. Alas, no – Duffield himself describes it as a 'geographic cliché.'

A huge military operation follows to hunt down the 'terrorists', as the attackers are everywhere described. Thousands of British troops are deployed to Tel Aviv. A curfew is imposed. Jewish residents of the city are dragged from their beds to be questioned. An arms cache is discovered in a synagogue, along with hoods similar to those worn by the recent abductors of a British officer, and British uniforms – presumably disguises to be used in future attacks. Yet while these discoveries are celebrated as successes, there seems to be little sense anywhere of where history is heading. Less than two years later, the British mandate is over. The British press, including some of the correspondents who reported on the bombing of the King David Hotel, are there to describe the 'weather-beaten, sun-dried Union Jack' being lowered from the roof of the building as the Mandate comes to an end. A 'solitary piper' plays at another official building – a piece of imperial performance as the British administration leave for the coast, and their ships home. In an echo of stories which have

appeared at times of troop withdrawals from Iraq or Afghanistan, the Daily Mirror, on 14 May 1948, lists improvements in agriculture and healthcare for a population which had been 'disease-ridden and poor' when Britain took over the territory. Among the accounts which appear in the press, one seems to stand out for its prescience. Frustrated that Cable and Wireless has closed down its operation (as if to reinforce her point, her report is datelined 'Jerusalem. By Air Mail') the distinguished – and pioneering, in the sense that she was a woman in what was then very much a man's world – foreign correspondent Clare Hollingworth notes that a 'large team' of American technicians has arrived to set up their own operation. She cleverly uses this as a departure point for her piece, which concludes, 'There is little doubt that the Jewish State will build itself up commercially at considerable speed and provide the United States with a firm foothold in the Middle East.' The new Jewish State does go on to 'build itself up', and not only commercially. In 1967, it wins a stunning victory in the Six Day war – a victory which brings Gaza and the West Bank under Israeli control, an occupation the consequences of which continue to fuel the conflict today. Reporters then realize that the region has changed. Winston S. Churchill, grandson of the wartime leader, concludes that the Middle East has changed 'for a generation or more'. James Cameron is even more direct. 'For good or ill, from today nothing can ever be the same again in the Middle East,' he writes on June 12th. 'The new book must start today.'

It is perhaps easy to draw such confident conclusions on a story such as the 1967 war, or September 11th. What the consequences of such dramatic change will be, however, is much harder to suggest in the midst of deadlines, and, in the case of conflict reporting, danger.

The end of the Cold War, for example, felt like unadulterated good news. At least it did to a western journalist. Yet when I stood in the square in Kiev that day in August 1991, I little imagined that in July 2014 I would be in a BBC World Service studio discussing the consequences of the shooting down of a passenger plane in Eastern Ukraine – still less that the disaster occurred during an armed conflict which, on one level at least, made adversaries of Russia and the West. Historians will one day untangle and set out the malice and mistakes which have brought us to where we now are, and authoritative reporting of international affairs will always draw on at least a basic knowledge of relevant history. How could you cover Yugoslavia in the 1990s without knowing what had happened there in the Second World War? How could you cover the Middle East without knowing something of the British Mandate in Palestine?

Scholars generally work in controlled, calm, locations such as archives and university libraries. They need to come to conclusions, but not usually when they are tired, thirsty, and perhaps scared. One of the great privileges of journalism is that you may get to witness world-changing events; one of the great challenges is that you may get them wrong. The first draft of history – as the description suggests – may well not be perfect, yet it is invaluable. Take a look at Gaza this summer. The diplomats are absent – at least, even if they are in the wider region, they are at a safe distance from where reporters are picking their way through the rubble. The historians will come to judge at their leisure whether the journalists' assessments have a value beyond the bulletin or the column. The journalists will have been there – getting it right, getting it wrong – but they will have given those who tackle the issues

afterwards something to work from. They may also, in the case of places like Gaza where diplomats cannot or will not go, be a main source of information for policy makers. In Jerusalem in June, I heard the story of a senior official briefing journalists after a deadly attack on a U.S. diplomatic convoy in Gaza in October 2003 (the incident was later dramatized in an episode of The West Wing). When asked where his initial information came from, he explained it was from news reports.